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# **From habituality to change: Contribution of activity theory and pragmatism to practice theories**

Reijo Miettinen, Sami Paavola & Pasi Pohjola

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## **Abstract**

The new social theories of practice have been inspired by Wittgenstein's late philosophy, phenomenology and more recent sociological theories. They regard embodied skills and routinized, mostly unconscious habits as a key foundation of human practice and knowledge. This position leads to an overstatement of the significance of the habitual dimension of practice. As several critics have suggested this approach omits the problems of transformative agency and change of practices. In turn classical practice theories, activity theory and pragmatism have analyzed the mechanisms of change. Pragmatism suggests that a crisis of a habit calls for reflection. Through working hypotheses and experimentation this leads to a transformation of a practice. Activity theory introduced the concept of remediation. A collective elaboration of shared mediational artefacts is needed to transform an activity.

## **Introduction**



that is, collective

elaboration of shared meditational artefacts

## **Bringing back the classical practice theories**

*Praxis and action: Contemporary philosophies of human activity*





**Habituality, practical understanding and change of practices**



Examples of what I have in mind are Bourdieu's habitus, otherwise called practical sense ("having a feeling for a game"), and Giddens's practical consciousness ("tacitly grasping a rule"), both conceptualizations [sic] the phenomenon of knowing how to go on highlighted in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Habitus and practical consciousness are alleged either always (Bourdieu) or often (Giddens) alleged to determine what people on particular occasions do. As a result, these phenomena also allegedly provide explanations of the particular actions involved. (Schatzki, 2002, p. 78-79.)

Spinoza, Flores, & Dreyfus

Writers such as Henry Mintzberg and Robert Solomon, like us, think that skills are more important than theory when it comes to dealing with the real world. We go beyond these thinkers in that we claim, first, that the skills that form the background for dealing with people, things, and selves contain an understanding of what it is to be anything at all and that taking up such practices gives one an identity and so gives one's life meaning .... (Spinoza, Flores, & Dreyfus, p. 191)

*legitimizing*

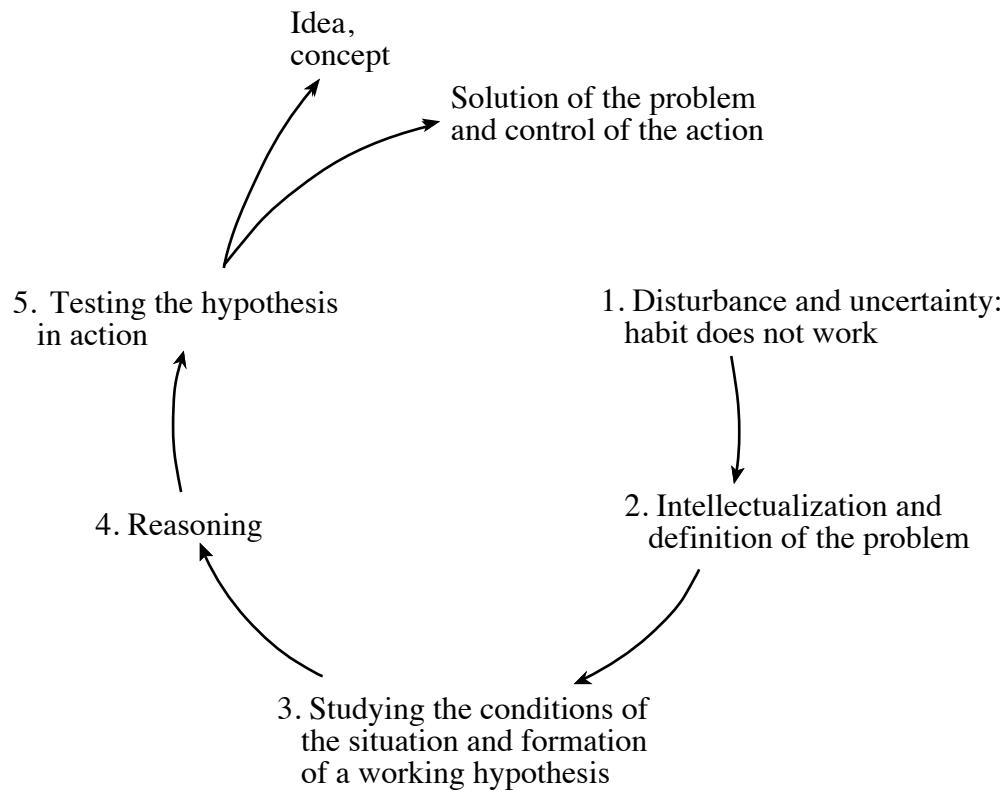
The *lack in completeness of being* is crucial: objects of knowledge in many fields have material instantiations, but they must simultaneously be conceived of as unfolding structures of absences: as things that continually ‘explode’ and ‘mutate’ into something else, and that are as much defined by what they are not ...than by what they are. (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, p. 182)



## **Breakdown of habits and reflection as explanations of transformation**

ased

on Dewey 1933/1986, pp. 199-208 and 1938/1991, pp. 105-122.



**Figure 1. Dewey's model of reflective thought and action. The graphic presentation is taken from Miettinen (2000, p. 65).**

Without a problem, there is blind groping in the dark. The way in which the problem is conceived decides what specific suggestions are entertained and which are dismissed; what data are selected and which rejected; it is the criterion for relevancy and irrelevancy of hypotheses and conceptual structures.

Upon this view, thinking, or knowledge-getting, is far from being the armchair thing it is often supposed to be. (...) Hands and feet, apparatus and appliances of all kinds are as much a part of it as changes in the brain (...) Thinking is mental, not because of a peculiar stuff which enters into it or of peculiar non-natural activities which constitute it, but because of what physical acts and appliances do: the distinctive purpose for which they are employed and the distinctive results which they accomplish.



## **Introducing mediating artefacts**

*artefacts*







*Thought and Language*

**Towards a theory of change**





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